

Silencing the Dog That Barks When Left Alone

Of all dog behavior problems, perhaps the most distressing one is the dog that barks when left alone. Incessant volleys of yips, woofs, and whines can be intolerable for those who live in close quarters or for those who need some peace and quiet in their life! The following categories may help determine which one or more describes your dog. Misreading the dog may result in failure to solve the barking problem.

1 – The Genetically Prone Barker

Virtually all terriers, and many small dogs, particularly Lhasa Apsos, Poodles, and Schnauzers fit into this category. These breed types have been pre-programmed; they bark at movement or noise within their “range.” Sensitive alarm barkers once bred to alert the farmer of the fox in the hen house, now announce that the phone is ringing, the neighbors are home, or that the elevator has arrived. They must be trained to limit their barking. Training them to bark on command gives you control; you can turn it “on” or “off” on your orders! It’s not that you don’t want them to bark; you just want them to be appropriate. Find a suitable place or time where the yappy dog can bark to his heart’s content.

2 – The Alpha/Territorial Barker

These barkers are most often non-neutered males and/or guarding breed types. They believe that they are protecting their yard, house, and general “air-space” from intruders such as the mailman, a squirrel, a passing dog, or a neighbor. Neutering may take the overprotective and/or territorial edge off the intact dog. Training will get the genetically protective dogs’ instincts in line. Blocking the dog’s view of the property line (stockade instead of chain-link fencing) and keeping him from patrolling the area around the front door or front porch may assist in cutting down the owner-absent barking. Monitor this type of dog carefully; do not permit him to bark at a passerby when you are home. If you cannot silence him when you are there, you can’t expect much when you’re not.

3 – The Bored Under-Exercised Dog

Sporting hound and herding breed types were bred to work all day long. Many retrievers, pointers, setters, collies, and the like find themselves sadly under-exercised, especially in the urban environment. These dogs need to be kept busy, if not, boredom turns into barking (not to mention chewing, pacing, and digging). Most need at least 2 (two) hours of vigorous, aerobic exercise a day. If you are going to be gone for an extended period of time (6+ hours), an hour of mentally challenging and physically active fun and games is mandatory. You should leave behind a panting, heaving, and utterly exhausted dog as you set off for the day.

4 – The Fearful, Neurotic Dog

Many of these dogs fall into the category of toy and miniature breed types. Dogs that have been passed around from home to home and shelter rescues also fit into this group. Their histories may include coddling and over-protective handling, lack of socialization, or isolation. Dogs that have never been out of the backyard or permanently paper trained apartment dwellers are candidates for anxiety behaviors if placed in a new home environment. These dogs suffer from separation anxiety when left behind, even for brief periods. Chewing, barking, house soiling, and digging are some typical responses. The majority of these dogs need to be properly socialized to the world around them. Obedience work with plenty of praise builds confidence, yielding a more stable dog; a dog with a better ability to cope.

The neurotic dog may feel less stressed out when home alone if he’s confined to a kennel crate – either the enclosed airline type (molded plastic) or a wire crate draped with a sheet or a tablecloth. With less space to worry about – just the bed and a chew toy, many dogs just curl up and calm down. A word of warning regarding dogs that shake, slobber, struggle and exhibit extreme escape behavior. In these instances you must seek counsel of a professional dog trainer and/or veterinarian that is well versed in canine behavior problems and can customize a program for the dog that may include short term drug therapy.

Environmental Changes To Minimize Owner-Absent Barking

1 – Keep the dog in the quietest part of the house. A dog with behavior problems has not earned “the run of the house.”

2 – Keep curtains and/or shades drawn. If you don’t have adequate window coverage, get some; hang a sheet or blanket across the window. A darker environment has a calming effect on most dogs. Additionally, there are no visual stimuli to provoke the territorial or bored dog. Curtains muffle sounds from the outdoors for alarm barkers.

3 – Leave a radio or TV on as “white noise.” In many households, the stereo/TV/radio is on from morning until night as long as someone is home. Imagine how “loud” the silence is when everyone is gone and the sound system is turned off! Beyond masking outside noises, leaving the radio/TV/stereo on gives the aural appearance of your presence.

4 – As you leave, give the dog an “only-when-I’m-gone” chew toy with your scent imparted on it. This toy should be something spectacular – a sterilized beef bone stuffed deeply and thoroughly with canned dog food or cheese spread (served frozen or chilled) or a flavorful beef basted knotted rawhide bone. Give it to the dog upon leaving; rub it between your palms several times before you go. Not only is this a diversion tactic, it actually makes being left alone not so bad, as this is the only time the “most-wonderful-thing-in-the-world” appears!

Barking Set Ups

If you have tried all of the above and you are still finding notes from your neighbors, you must desensitize the dog to your departures with “barking set ups.” Set-ups take time; slow incremental progress is a necessary part of the program. Be prepared to use a long weekend or some vacation time before beginning the program.

First, imitate your daily departure routine. Do you usually put on make-up, search about for keys, gloves, etc, pack a gym bag or throw out the garbage? Make the dog think that this is just like any other daily departure.

Second, while giving him his special goodbye toy, get eye contact and tell him in a firm and matter-of-fact manner to be quiet until your return. Please no longwinded emotional scenes; no begging, pleading, or whining for him to be quiet. It will only serve to emotionally charge the situation and further stress-out the dog.

Leave for a brief period of time, just a minute or two to start with. If you normally lock the door with your keys, make the right noises, but don’t lock it. You must be able to enter quickly if the dog begins to bark; this is not the time to fumble around with your keys. If you wait for an elevator, ring for it and get in. Go one floor down and come back up using the stairs. If your dog has not barked, return and gently praise. If you hear him begin to bark, burst back into the house hollering, QUIET! Then turn and leave again.

This time, if the dog barks, punctuate your command for silence with the rattle of a shaker can (empty soda can filled with 15 pennies, fewer for fearful dogs) to startle the dog into silence. Praise the dog when he quiets down and leave again.

The goal, of course, is to be able to stay away for longer and longer periods of time without having to go back in and correct the dog for barking. The time away must be built up in small intervals. Set goals (5, 10, 15 minutes) and go back in and praise the dog if he remained quiet for the set amount of time. Don’t wait for an undetermined amount of time and only go in to correct the dog for finally barking. Silence must be praised. Appropriate behavior must be acknowledged.

Most dogs that can remain silent for two hours can usually stay quiet for an 8 to 10 hour work day. It is building up to that first hour or so that may take several days of set-ups to achieve.

For the dog that believes that negative attention from you is better than no attention at all, you will have to intensify your response. When you return, do so quietly, do not shout QUIET, but instead toss the shake can near him (not at him); do it without the dog seeing you take aim. Do not do this with a fearful dog. The dog gets an “environmental” correction for barking, not a correction associated with you (verbal). A throw chain aimed at the dog’s rear below the tail can have the same effect, resulting in a startled silence, which you then praise.

Barking set ups can be tedious, but they usually work if you take the time to do them properly; barking problems are rarely solved in a day. Let your neighbors know that you are not ignoring their complaints; that you understand their discomfort and you are taking steps to correct the problem. Quite often, they will cut you a little slack if they know that their complaints have not fallen upon deaf ears.

By Jacque Schultz, Companion Animal Services Copyright 1991

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